



National Guard Association of Connecticut
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March 7, 2013

Testimony in Favor of Raised Bills 930, 931, 934, 935, 6455, 6457, 6458, 6459 and 6561

Good Afternoon Sen. Leone, Representative Hennessy and members of the Committee on Veterans Affairs. I am Debbi Newton, Legislative Chair of the National Guard Association of Connecticut (NGACT). I have served in that position for 10 years and have been a member of the Connecticut National Guard for 33 years.

I am here today to speak in favor of several bills currently before you.

SB 930, An Act Concerning Servicemembers Civil Relief Act Proceedings will allow members of the Services who are deployed or away at training schools to choose to appear before a civil proceeding via electronic means for family relations proceedings such as divorce, child custody and adoptions as examples. Many times these proceedings must be delayed due to a Servicemember not being able to be in physical attendance, thus prolonging issues that can cause great stress to the Servicemember and his/her family. NGACT supports anything that gives a military member the option to reduce stress that can often be detrimental to their performance as Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen or Marines.

SB 931, An Act Concerning Veteran-Owned Small Businesses and HB 6561, An Act Concerning Veterans both task the Department of Veterans Affairs with maintaining databases/registries that will benefit Veterans. 931 would establish a data base of Veteran-owned small businesses to determine the feasibility of providing legislation to offer state contracting preferences to those businesses. As you know, NGACT has been supportive of legislation to offer the Veterans contracting preferences as well as low or no cost loans to Veterans who want to start or re-establish their businesses after a deployment. This registry would go a long way in moving towards those two objectives. 6561 is something I am actually surprised we need to legislate. Determining what issues face our Veterans should be a given. We need to know what their difficulties are in order to properly serve them and provide the assistance they need. NGACT supports this legislative initiative that will only help our Veterans and their families.

SB 934, An Act Concerning Fee Waivers for Educational Extension Programs and Summer School Sessions for Wartime Veterans and Members of the Connecticut National Guard and HB 6459, An Act Concerning Tuition Waivers for Certain Veterans and Members of the National Guard Enrolled at Charter Oak State College are both initiatives NGACT has long supported and advocated for. In the 1980s, legislation was passed that granted tuition waivers to state colleges and Universities to members in good standing of the Connecticut National Guard. That tuition waiver was

expanded a few years ago to include advanced degrees. Somehow, Charter Oak State College was never included in the tuition waiver program, and to my knowledge, is the only state school that does not participate. They do, however, offer CLEP testing for free to members of the National Guard. Summer, Winter and Extension Courses have also not been included in the tuition waivers because they do not charge a tuition, but rather are fee-based courses. Many of our Guardsmen take these shorter term courses in order to finish their degrees sooner or to fit the courses in between deployment cycles and military training obligations. In some cases, these shorter sessions are the only time that a course they need for their degree is offered. Finishing their degrees make these servicemen and women much more valuable members of their communities and assist them in finding rewarding careers that help them support their families. Many Guardsmen have deployed and are eligible for the Post 9/11 GI Bill, but there are still some gaps for them in education benefits. For those that have not deployed or served on active duty long enough to receive the Post 9/11 GI Bill Benefits, waiving the tuition at Charter Oak and fees for the other courses outlined in SB 934 may be the difference in them completing their degree or not. With unemployment among our Veterans so high, it seems to me that this is a great way to reach out to our Veterans, less than 1% of the population by the way, and give them the means to earn their degree, thereby having the ability to earn a living and give back to their state and communities.

SB 935, An Act Concerning Excused Absences from School for Children of Servicemembers is a new idea and as far as I know the Texas Legislature is the only other state with this proposal before them. An article about their proposal is attached. AS we all know, having a parent deploy is very stressful for a child. Allowing them to spend some uninterrupted time with that parent before and/or after a deployment can help ease some of that stress which the children take into the classroom with them. We are not asking for a "get out of school free" card here, parents and students would be responsible for getting the assignments they would miss in advance, completing them while on the excused absence and turning them in upon their return to school in order to receive the excused absence. Providing a maximum of 10 days excused absence allows for children whose parents deploy for six months the ability to spend 5 days with them prior to the deployment and five days with them upon their return home. For children whose parents deploy for a full year, the 10 days per school year could be used at the beginning in one year and the end of the deployment during the next school year. Many parents pull their children out of school for mini vacations or reunions upon their return or prior to the deployment already, which hurts the students' attendance records, potentially holding them back a year, and could also hurt the school's standing if it is in a high military populated area. Parents would have to request the excused absence in advance and have it approved. NGACT urges passage of this initiative and looks forward to working with the Committee and the Education Community to make it happen.

HB 6455, An Act Creating the Connecticut Medal of Achievement is a NGACT initiative. The Military awards and decoration program is designed to recognize outstanding acts or achievements of individual service members. The program is generally based on a series of awards and decorations designed to recognize the act or achievement based on the relative significance of the act or service. Awards and decorations are sequenced in an order of precedence, determined by law and regulation. A higher, more prestigious, award is authorized for more significant acts or achievements. As commanders consider recognition of their service members for outstanding acts or achievement, they consider the significance of the act or achievement

on the overall mission. As significance increases, so does selectivity, with only the most significant acts or service being recognized with the highest awards.

Currently, Connecticut General Statute only allows commanders two options to recognize outstanding service members, The Connecticut Medal of Valor and the Connecticut Medal of Merit. The Medal of Valor, our highest (and only) award for valor, is reserved for acts "(by) of (reason of) conspicuous gallantry, at the risk of his life, above and beyond the call of duty" The Medal of Merit is awarded to service members "who has distinguished himself by exceptionally meritorious conduct in performing outstanding service".

The lack of an intermediate award for service has several unintended consequences. First, it limits our commanders' ability to recognize acts and achievements not warranting the award of our highest decorations. Additionally, should commanders recommend their service members for the existing decorations, the award of the decoration diminishes the value of the award and reduces the standard by which we measure and recognize the service and achievement of our members. This lack of an appropriate award, commensurate with the act or achievement, often results in our service members going unrecognized for their service.

The criteria stated in the bill are clear as to the required levels of act or service necessary for award of the decoration. The language of the criteria was adapted from the Army criteria for the award of a similar award by the Army for Federal service. (Current statute is attached)

NGACT also supports HB 6457, An Act Concerning the Display of the State or National Flag at Half-Staff.

NGACT fully understands the fiscal situation the state is facing, but we ask you to remember when casting your votes on these bills, that they directly affect only 1% of our population...those who chose to serve their Country and, in some cases their State, but will also have an indirect affect on their families. Some of these proposals do carry price tags, but have the potential to pay off in the long run. These bills are all effective ways of saying thank you to these men and women, helping them transition into civilian life as productive citizens and relieving some of the stresses they may face.

I thank you for your time and for what you do for the Veterans, Military Members and Retirees of Connecticut and their families. This concludes my testimony and I am available for any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

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January 3, 2013

Bill Would Give Military Families More Time With Kids

By Anna M. Tinsley

Jonathan Stickland wants to help Texas' military families.

So the Hurst Republican, who will be sworn in as one of Tarrant County's newest state representatives on Tuesday, has filed a bill to give children of some military service members more time with their parents.

Stickland's proposal would allow those children 10 days of excused absence from school when their parent is about to be deployed or has returned home from deployment.

"We want to make sure military families are taken care of," Stickland said. "We talked to school districts here and they said that typically these kids are taking time off to go on a mini-vacation with their family and it's hurting the kids, counting as unexcused absences against them.

"This bill solves the problems on all ends, puts the families first and allows families to do what they need to do," he said. "It protects the children; it protects the school district. I think it's a win-win all the way around."

House Bill 202 states that a school district should allow a maximum of 10 excused absences for a student whose parent or legal guardian is an active duty member of the uniformed services who has been called to duty, is on leave from or has returned from a six-month or longer deployment.

Currently, the state requires students to be present for at least 90 percent of the school year.

A large number of absences not only affects the amount of funds schools receive from the state, but it also can impact a student's learning, making it difficult for them to keep pace or catch up with the rest of the class.

Absences are excused for various reasons - illness, death in the family, quarantine and weather - but too many absences, whether excused or unexcused, could lead to a student being held back a grade.

Regarding children of active duty military parents, the current rule of thumb is that "a school superintendent may excuse a student's absence for the purpose of visiting with a parent or legal guardian who is an active duty member of the uniformed services and has been called to duty for, is on leave from, or immediately returned from deployment to a combat zone or combat support posting," according to the Texas Education Agency website.

State Rep.-elect Matt Krause, R-Fort Worth, said he asked to co-author the proposal to make sure those children have time with their parents.

"Military members are putting their lives on the line for us," he said. "When they go off or come back safely, we want to make sure families can spend time with them at those junctures.

"But we don't want to penalize schools and have them lose funding."

The proposed legislation, which would go into effect Sept. 1 if approved, drew some positive comments locally.

"This proposal seems to be a compassionate and thoughtful gesture toward the families of our service members," said Michael Sorum, deputy superintendent of learning, leadership and student support for the Fort Worth school district. "Separation from a parent is always stressful for a child. Separation because of military service brings its own set of unique situations which can generate even more stress than usual.

"Allowing our military families some extra time to adjust to an imminent departure will help students and families be more successful," he said. "We know that military parents understand the importance of doing well in school and we know that they will use these extra privileges judiciously."

Stickland said his proposal is similar to one that was filed late in the 2011 legislative session.

And he said he plans to work to make sure there is support on both sides of the political aisle for this proposal. "I don't think it's a partisan issue," he said. "I plan on having a lot of bipartisan support."

PART VII HONORS

Sec. 27-71. Long service medals. The Adjutant General, upon receipt of an application, shall present the long service medal adopted by this state to each soldier or sailor who has completed ten years' faithful service in the armed forces of the state and for each additional five years' service therein the adopted clasp in exchange. In the determination of length of service, the term of service of any member of the armed forces of the state with the military or naval forces of the United States in time of war since April 21, 1898, upon proof of honorable discharge from the same, may be added to the number of years served with the armed forces of the state.

(1949 Rev., S. 1284; 1957, P.A. 365, S. 41.)

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Sec. 27-72. Medal of valor. The Adjutant General and two officers of field grade or above, detailed by the Adjutant General, shall act as a board to receive recommendations through military channels for the award of the medal of valor to any member of the armed forces of the state who, by reason of conspicuous gallantry, at the risk of his life, above and beyond the call of duty, while on military service, is recommended for the award of such medal of valor, and to make such awards as the board finds suitable.

(November, 1955, S. N115.)

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Sec. 27-73. Medal of merit. The Adjutant General and two officers of field grade or above, appointed by the Adjutant General, shall constitute a board of officers to receive recommendations, through military channels, for the award of the medal of merit to any member of the armed forces of the state who has distinguished himself by exceptionally meritorious conduct in performing outstanding service while a member of the armed forces of the state and to make such awards as the board finds suitable.

(November, 1955, S. N116.)

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Sec. 27-73a. Emergency service awards. The Adjutant General, at his discretion, may issue an appropriate service ribbon to all members of the armed forces of the state ordered to active duty in time of emergency in accordance with section 27-14 for upholding the law and preserving order, or protecting lives and property, or assisting civil authorities, or the aid and relief of civilians in disaster or similar service ordered by the Governor. A bronze oak leaf cluster shall be issued in lieu of succeeding awards and a silver oak leaf cluster may be worn in lieu of three bronze oak leaf clusters. This section shall apply to service rendered on or after August 19, 1955.

(1961, P.A. 293; 1963, P.A. 253.)

History: 1963 act substituted discretionary language for mandatory provision for issuance of service ribbon when members ordered to active duty and deleted provision for a seven-day minimum for eligibility.

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Sec. 27-73b. Outstanding unit awards. The Adjutant General shall issue an appropriate service ribbon to all members of the unit declared to be the outstanding company-size unit in the Connecticut National Guard in accordance with National Guard regulations, provided such members participated in at least fifty per cent of the unit's training activities during the period covered by the award. A bronze oak leaf cluster shall be issued in lieu of succeeding awards and a silver oak leaf cluster may be worn in lieu of three bronze oak leaf clusters. These awards shall be made retroactive to 1947.

(1961, P.A. 297.)

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Sec. 27-73c. Selected reserve force awards. The Adjutant General may issue the selected reserve force ribbon to members of the armed forces of the state who have served honorably in a selected reserve force unit designated by the United States Army for a period of at least one year from October 1, 1965, to September 3, 1969, inclusive. The award may be issued to current, retired or separated members of the armed forces of the state, and may be awarded posthumously.

(P.A. 87-58.)

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Sec. 27-73d. Service ribbons for military operations after September 11, 2001. The Adjutant General may issue an appropriate service ribbon to members of the National Guard or organized militia who were called to active service in the armed forces of the state or United States for at least thirty consecutive days in support of any military operation commencing after September 11, 2001, during a time of war, as defined in section 27-103. A bronze service star shall be issued in lieu of succeeding awards and a silver service star shall be worn in lieu of five bronze stars. The ribbon may be awarded posthumously.

(P.A. 91-400, S. 4, 5; P.A. 05-21, S. 1.)

History: P.A. 05-21 changed reference to "Connecticut National Guard" to "National Guard or organized militia", added requirement that service be for at least 30 consecutive days, deleted reference to "Operation Desert Shield or Operation Desert Storm" and substituted reference to "any military operation commencing after September 11, 2001, during a time of war", and added provision re issuance of bronze service star

and wearing of silver service star in lieu of five bronze stars, and made technical changes, effective May 9, 2005.

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Sec. 27-73e. Ribbons and medals for veterans who served in time of war.

Regulations. The Commissioner of Veterans' Affairs in conjunction with the Adjutant General shall award a ribbon and medal to each veteran who served in time of war, as defined in subsection (a) of section 27-103, and who either (1) was a resident of this state at the time he or she was called to active duty for such service, or (2) is domiciled in this state on the date of such award. The commissioner in conjunction with the Adjutant General shall adopt regulations, in accordance with chapter 54, setting forth the process for designing the ribbon and medal, identifying veterans who are eligible for the ribbon and medal under this section and establishing procedures for distributing the ribbon and medal to each eligible veteran. The cost of the ribbons and medals shall be paid from the funds appropriated to the military assistance account within the Military Department. Within existing budgetary resources, awards under this section may be made posthumously for veterans who died on or after January 1, 2000.

(June Sp. Sess. P.A. 05-3, S. 15; P.A. 08-87, S. 1; P.A. 09-90, S. 1.)

History: June Sp. Sess. P.A. 05-3 effective July 1, 2005; P.A. 08-87 authorized awards to be made posthumously on or after July 1, 2005, effective May 23, 2008; P.A. 09-90 added language re posthumous awards, within existing budgetary resources, to veterans who died on or after January 1, 2000, effective June 2, 2009.

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Sec. 27-73f. Achievement ribbons. The Adjutant General shall issue an achievement ribbon to the soldier, airman and noncommissioned officer of the year in the Connecticut National Guard.

(P.A. 08-87, S. 4.)

History: P.A. 08-87 effective July 1, 2008.